

St. Mark's Episcopal Church
Albuquerque, New Mexico
Sunday May 19, 2019
Text: John 13: 35-41
Preacher: The Rev. Christopher McLaren
Theme: Learning to Love in Community

A friend of mine once told me that if you were not a little nervous about the message you were preaching then maybe you were not taking the risks that gospel invites us into. So, this sermon comes with a warning, I intend for it to be a sermon that is joyful, difficult, thought-provoking and fierce.

This past week I was listening to NPR and a surprising story came on the radio about Christian love. The former general counsel for the FBI Jim Baker was being interviewed about an essay he had written about trying to love his enemies. It grabbed my attention. Baker had been attacked publicly by our president and had every reason to resent him but here he was talking on public radio about the call to Christian love.

As it turns out Baker is a Christian and he had been reading Dr. Martin Luther King Jr's, "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," in which he quotes Matthew 5:44, "love your enemies. Bless them that curse you. Pray for them that despitefully use you."

Here is what Baker had to say about reading that letter for the first time:

"That passage that you cited just - literally just jumped off the page in me. And I reflected about it and thought, well, this is what I think I'm being charged by Dr. King to think about now in my current circumstances. I was just viscerally unhappy with, I think, the way that many people react to the president, with a lot of what I would say anger, and I would say even hatred, animosity. And I would hear that on a regular basis. And then I would also - I also have family members who are supporters of the president. And I'm trying to - I was trying to think about how to reconcile these various positions. And what just came to me through the letter, through reading Dr. King's letter, was just to let go of all the anger and hatred, approach it in a different way through something like love."

Here was a man struggling on public radio with the Christian demands of love. The whole interview is fascinating and Baker's essay which led to the interview more so. But here is a little bit more of the back and forth between Rachel Martin of NPR and Baker:

MARTIN: So how has that manifested? I mean, what does that look like on a daily basis?

BAKER: I don't know. I haven't figured that out yet. (Laughter). What I'm saying is I feel as though that's my obligation to try to figure out how to do

that, and also to love not only the president but his family and, importantly, his supporters, who include members of my family.

MARTIN: In "Letter from A Birmingham Jail," Martin Luther King talks about the fact that with love comes a sense of accountability, that love must be an agent for change. How do you reflect on that in this circumstance?

BAKER: I don't have a solution to all of these problems. I'm focused right now on what the right orientation is for me. And I think this is...

MARTIN: Does your love for President Trump - if we may say that - does it come with an effort to hold him accountable?

BAKER: Absolutely. The love I'm talking about is not some passive, sappy kind of love. It's strong. It's forceful. It's determined. It rejects things that dehumanize other people, such as bigotry, racism. It absolutely rejects those. And by loving the person, you don't have to love the deeds that they do. And in fact, exactly as you suggest, you need to hold - we need to hold people accountable for what it is that they do.

There of course is not time for the entire interview and I commend the essay that he wrote to you but I found this piece of his writing helpful.

Loving someone with whom you disagree or whom you do not admire holds the potential for transforming that person for the better. But even if it appears to have no effect on the other person, loving transforms and frees the person who loves. -- Former FBI counsel Jim Baker

In the Gospel reading today, it is clear that Jesus' death is the supreme act of love for his disciples. In the John's Gospel "The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep" (John 10:15). But somehow the way that Jesus lays down his life creates something new, as in fact all true sacrifices do. What is new? The way Jesus lived and the way Jesus died creates what the New Testament writer calls a new commandment. The death of Jesus is not the end of the story, rather it is the beginning of something new, of a new way of loving, a new way of living. As the saying goes, there are some defeats that are more glorious than victories. This is the case in the death of Jesus. His death, his embrace of the cross creates something new that we are bidden to follow.

In John's Gospel the emphasis is a bit different and it bears close examination. As one theologian said, "The towering insight of Johannine theology is that God first loved us." We love because God has first loved us" (I John 4:19). This loving of God of course is made most clear in the human person of Jesus who lays down his life for his friends. We know of God's loving us first because of the love that was poured out onto the disciples by Jesus. The New Commandment is to be like Jesus, to love like he loves. The first step in the new commandment is to become aware of the fact that Jesus joined us at the depth of our humanity, he entered the same dark waters that you and I share. The more we get to know Christ, the more we realize that Christ is with us in our deepest fears, our most shattering losses, in the times where we are not sure what it is that sustains us if not the presence of God in our lives.

It's important to think deeply about the nature of love and loving for it is so important to our own thriving and to human thriving in general. The writer, James Mackey, writes these words that I find quite moving about the dynamics of our human endeavor to love:

"I simply will not feel my own life, my own self, as grace or gift from God, unless someone values me... I may see, at first blush, that this stands the whole logic of the reign of God on its head... The logic should surely read: first feel all life and existence as grace and then feel inspired to be gracious to others. Not, first feel the grace of some human presence, feel forgiven, accepted, served, then begin to feel all life and existence as grace, and then feel inspired to be gracious to others. But it is really a universal human idiosyncrasy that is operative here, not a matter of logic... [Most of us] can only sense ourselves and our world valued and cherished by God when we feel valued and cherished by others."
(Jesus: The Man and the Myth [Mahway, JN: Paulist Press, 1979] 170).

Maybe this seems obvious to you, but I found it stunning. The simple truth is this, the way people come to know and love God is through the human. It is, I admit a paradox. It is a paradox that grounds the new commandment to love one another. Our loving of one another is essential if each of us is to know the love of God. It reminds us that we are social creatures, we really do need each other, we really do serve each other, we really are helping each other toward the kingdom of God in the everyday acts of love, in our risk to forgive one another, our efforts to serve each other, in our listening to one another, in our working through the hard moments in our lives when we are tempted to be less than our best selves and run away or wound.

This description of how people come to know the love of God through their ongoing connection to people who love them is powerful for me. I look back on the many people who loved me and who loved God and it is not an accident that I found my way into the community of faith. I can recount Sunday school teachers and youth leaders who listened to me, who handled my energy and embraced me, and who did me the honor of not only telling me about Jesus but of being like Jesus in my life. Their wisdom and love and mentoring were life-shaping for me and I give thanks for that self-giving love that I did not earn but benefited from immeasurably.

To understand the story of Jesus in this way is to see it with a kind of double vision. Jesus' life is an act of loving his disciples but at the same time it is also a revelation of God's gracious love. Jesus' love points toward the source of grace, toward the steadfast love of God that never ceases, whose mercies never come to an end.

One of our key tasks is to be a community that holds at its center a dangerous memory. At the center of our lives we hold the dangerous memory of Jesus who was willing to lay down his life for his friends. Each week we gather here and tell the story again and again. We persevere in this memory and what is more we endeavor to enact that same kind of self-giving love toward each other. It is a love that is not

rooted in our own capacity to love first, but rather in the fact that we have been loved first, that God in Christ demonstrated his great love for us.

We are to love each other just as Jesus loved his disciples. That is the charge and the challenge. And if you have been around the church for any real length of time you realize what a tall order it actually is, to love as Jesus loved. It is not all that difficult to listen to your friends most of the time. It may be a bit harder to ask their forgiveness when you've hurt them but that is usually manageable as well, it is important to stick close to them when they are going through difficult and troubling times. But the Church asks us to do that not just for our friends but for those with whom we worship, with those who we are being made into a community with and that is a rather tall order no matter how well your mama trained you. It is only possible by the grace of God, active in our lives and through the constant reminder of our dangerous memory of Christ's love.

The Christian community is a participatory endeavor, we hear the story of Jesus at the same time we watch and participate in the way of life that the story engenders and encourages.

What we hope for is some coherence between the story we are learning and the way we are living. I recently heard a story from another pastor that goes right to this point. His church has been talking about how much they wanted children in their congregation and how they would love to have young families worshiping with them. One Sunday morning a young family with a child visited the church. They sat toward the back knowing that they might need to slip out to quiet the baby during the service. At one point in the service the baby started to fuss a little and the father stood up to try to settle the child a bit, to move around and see if they would quiet down. But before he could do anything to settle the child four or five people turned around and gave him the stink-eye. There were no smiles or offers of help or whispers of "don't worry we love kids and we're glad you're here." Sadly, the family made their way out to the narthex to quiet their child and never returned. Living out the story of radical welcome is difficult and uncomfortable at times. It requires hard work and sacrifice and a willingness to give up on perfection and to love the people who are right in front of us.

When we say we are building something beautiful for God in our neighborhood we are doing something mysterious and wonderful. We are choosing to belong to a community that carries the tradition and memory of Jesus through time and space so that we too can access this story for our own lives. We are hanging around a group of people who are in their faltering and fumbling ways trying to live out the reality of God's love as well.

When we hurt each other or get into conflict, we ask forgiveness, talk about it, confess it and try to get a new start. When we fail each other, we acknowledge it but don't hold it against each other for the next 50 years or cut off the relationship. When we have troubles in our life, we share them so that others can help us carry

the burden. When we are hurting, we let others comfort us and hold us up in prayer. When we are in crisis or recovering, we allow the community to help in ways that they can, driving us to dr. appointments, bringing us meals, and keeping our spirits up. When we have children, we look to the community to help us shape and raise them into Christian women and men so that they too may know the joy and wonder of life with God. When something beautiful happens in our life we give thanks and share our joy with others who know the Risen One as well.

Being a part of the church is a sacred and beautiful mystery. The church helps us to know and remember the presence of Christ through the proclaiming of sacred story and through the shared meal of bread and wine around the Eucharistic table. We need both the witness of scripture and the experience of a community of faith to remember the love of Jesus and to love one another as he has loved us. To be sure there are others who have poured the love of God into our lives without us knowing its source. That we know the love of God in our lives at all is a deep grace and one that redoubles when it is shared. Let St. Mark's be a community who knows the love of God in our loving of one another. Let us a be a community that others experience and say, look how much they love one another, look at how much they care for each other, look how the love of Jesus is poured out into the world through them.

Notes: The NPR interview with former general counsel of the FBI Jim Baker aired on May 14, 2019 on Morning Edition. The Essay "Why I do not hate Donald Trump" written by Jim Backer appeared in Lawfare on May 10, 2019 and can be found here: <https://www.lawfareblog.com/why-i-do-not-hate-donald-trump>.

I am also deeply indebted to the commentary and writing of John Shea in the shaping of this sermon especially for the quotation from James Mackey about the paradox of how we learn about God's love through human love.